



3
TALES
FOR THE
HORRID
AT
HEART
BY ♥
BRAD
STEIGER
♥

Illustrator SUMMERS

RX: Take three traditional fantasy backgrounds . . .

Add a sprinkling of goose-pimply adverbs . . .

Stir briefly . . .

Then drop in a most unexpected ending.

Result:

Three Tales for the Horrid at Heart

RAPPORT I

I LIE chained to a bed in a lonely cabin about to embark on an experiment that will not only gain me \$5,000, but do much to advance the study of extra sensory perception.

I turn my head to glance at my wrist watch. Three minutes to go. Three minutes before Karl will mentally send me the test message. I wish I had someone around to light a cigarette for me, but I agreed to the most rigorous test conditions so that I might prove to Karl the validity of mental telepathy. Consequently, I am alone in his hunting cabin, miles from anyone, chained to a metal bed, completely immobile, completely isolated from humanity until Karl has

sent his message and come to release me.

The message can be anything. A passage from the Bible, a nursery rhyme, a bit of nonsense verse, or maybe something completely original. It makes no difference. I am confident of my ability to receive thought communication.

I don't mean to say that I'm able to go about reading people's minds. Hardly. But when an individual uses all the mental energy he is capable of mustering and directs his thought waves at me, I've always been able to receive the message. I've proved it. At countless parties, bars, even for Professor Rhine at Duke University under the strictest of laboratory conditions. But there's always another skeptic

who demands inexplicable proof. Karl Henderson is such a doubter. In fact, I believe that Rose, my own wife, thinks I'm a bit of a charlatan.

That's how this little test came into being. Karl and I have known each other for years, and, of course, he's been fully aware of my study of ESP. He, as he always reminds me with puffed chest, is a practical man. Anyway, he finally got up enough nerve to bet me \$5,000 that I could not receive a mental communication under the test conditions he set up.

So here I am, miles from anywhere, (I suppose Karl's under the delusion that distance will make a difference) waiting to take his message and his \$5,000. Rose is to act as the judge. He will say the message aloud to her, then concentrate on the message for three minutes, after which time they shall jump in his car and drive out to the cabin to see if I have received the communique.

Ah! 3:15. Time to clear my mind of all thoughts. Prepare to attain rapport. Now. Yes.

"Well, sucker, if this telepathy jazz works, you won't be surprised when Rosie and I don't come to pick you up today. In fact, Rose and I are going away together. Like Mexico, maybe. She's decided she wants to make it with a

real man for a change, instead of some crackpot. I'll see you, or what's left of you, sometime this fall when I go hunting. So long."

For just a few seconds I strain at the chains that bind me securely, then I lie still, letting the tears scald my eyes, realizing that in my victory I have found only defeat.

RAPPORT II

WHO comes now from the spirit world?" asked the sepulchral voice of Professor Marco.

"Henry Mallet," replied a quivering mass of ectoplasm that had suddenly materialized in the darkness above the seance circle.

Pete Simpson shifted uncomfortably in his chair as Mrs. Henry Mallet tightened her grip on his left hand. Fifteen years on the racket squad had inured Simpson to such visitors from beyond. He would much rather have been home watching television. And, if he had not been so eager to prove the medium a fraud, that's exactly where he would have been.

Mrs. Mallet exchanged pleasantries with her dear departed husband, kissed at the air as he left once more for the "other side." Next there appeared a visitor for the woman on his right. Pete had been able to tell from the small trembling hand in his that the lady was a novice

to seance theatrics. She barely managed to stifle her sobs as a child's head materialized above her right shoulder.

Simpson narrowed his eyes. This Marco was a damned clever medium. Sitting there in a semi-trance, looking fatherly with his full, dark beard, he seemed the perfect counselor for seekers of solace.

Soon everyone in the circle had received a visitor. Everyone except Simpson. Which made sense, he thought, because it was his first time in the circle and Marco hadn't received a make on him.

Then Simpson was surprised to hear: "My friend, you have not yet received a visitor. If you would tell me your loved one's name, I will try again to establish contact."

What a break! Pete had been afraid he would have to attend several dull sessions before he could get enough goods on Marco to nail him. Now the bogus professor was delivering himself like a lamb to the slaughter.

"I came, Professor Marco, to seek communion with my beloved wife, Janet," Pete said in sorrowful voice.

"I shall try my best to contact her," Mardo said.

PETE was glad for the darkness that covered his grin. The easiest way to contact Janet

would be by telephone. Right now she was probably singing along with Mitch and nibbling on popcorn.

"I—I'm having some difficulty getting through," Marco said. Even in the dimness, Simpson could see veins standing out on the medium's forehead.

"Try, professor," Pete said. "Please try!" If he could get the Professor to materialize a bunch of ectoplasm (luminous gauze) that claimed to be Janet, he'd have the phoney medium and his cohorts behind bars.

The medium's breathing took on the magnitude of a bellows. Rivulets of sweat glistened in the half-light. His face twisted itself into a mask of concentrated agony.

"Try professor," Pete said, enjoying the medium's performance. "Please help me!"

Suddenly Marco's body became ramrod stiff. A scream echoed in the tomb-like seance chamber. Janet's scream!

Before Pete's eyes swirled a diaphanous figure with the features of his wife. "What have you done to me?" the figure wailed. "What have you done?"

Simpson leaped to his feet, his mouth gaping, his eyes bugging. He'd never seen anything like it!

"Don't move! Don't talk!" "Don't break the circle!" "Think of the harm you may do Profes-

sor Marco!" Voices hissed at him from the darkness. Simpson shook his head to free it of the image of that thing with Janet's face, Janet's voice. He cursed himself for reacting so strongly to the medium's trickery. This Marco was damned good. His convincing performance had nearly caught an old cop off guard.

"Thank you, professor," he said. "You don't know how much this has meant to me."

And you don't know how much it has meant to *you*, Pete thought grimly. A command performance for the judge tomorrow afternoon.

Marco smiled feebly, mopped the sweat from his face with a black handkerchief. "My only object is to serve," he said.

You soon will be, Pete thought as he returned the smile. Serving a nice long stretch.

* * *

"I'm home, toots," Pete called as he unlocked the front door. He could hear the television in the living room. "Boy, wait'll I tell you about tonight. You were the star of the seance. This Marco character is really a performer. Almost had me . . ."

Pete Simpson crossed the living room to the easy chair in which his wife sprawled in front of the television set. She was dressed in her lounging pajamas. There was half a coke and a bowl

of popcorn on the floor. On her face was a look of undecipherable horror. She was dead.

RAPPORT III

AND you claim you've seen this . . . thing walking through the graveyard, Smithers?" I ask, turning up my collar against the cold October mist.

"Yes, Carruthers," he says soberly. "It shows up just after midnight."

We're standing huddled against the side of a moss-covered crypt, trembling with cold, perhaps with fear. If this is just one of Smithers's wild stories, I'll tear him apart. I'd planned to visit one of the village girls tonight.

"What do you say that it is?" I ask, offering him a cigarette from my pack. "Man, beast, or thing?"

"Man, I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Well, a beast would probably be easier to handle."

I nod. "And you feel that this . . . whatever it is . . . has been responsible for the recent deaths in this vicinity?"

"I told you before, Carruthers. I've seen this fiend enter the graveyard and prowl about the crypts . . . always on the night of a murder!"

"What twisted mind could be capable of such ghastly murders?" I shudder. "Did you see

the look on old Jake Humbert's face? And the way his chest had been caved in. . . . We're up against a monster of incredible strength."

"He's murdered all three of them at dawn while they were sleeping," Smithers says, looking apprehensively about him. "I tell you none of us are safe with that beast running loose!"

We stand a few moments in silence, smoking. Then we hear something coming. The fog is so dense we can't see for certain, but the shuffling sounds seem to be coming from the gravel road that leads into the graveyard. We grind out our cigarettes beneath nervous toes. The rusty gates squeal their protest as something forces them apart. The sounds grow louder, closer.

"My god! Look at the size of that brute!"

"Looks mean as hell!"

"But there are two of us!"

"Has he a weapon?"

"Yes. A . . . a wooden stake and a mallet!"

"Then we must strike . . . now!"

Smithers glides silently behind the big man while I appear suddenly in front of him.

"You . . . you're one of them!" the brute says in a harsh, guttural voice.

Wild-eyed and cursing, he lunges for me with the pointed wooden stake. Then Smithers is on his back, sinking his fangs into the soft flesh of his neck. I move in to help him finish the job.

After it is all over, we stand panting heavily from our exertions . . . and our full stomachs.

"Why must there always be some damn human who still believes in us!" curses Smithers. "This murderer got three of us with his damn stake and mallet!"

THE END

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